Sharing Space: Philosophical, Theological, and Wesleyan Resources for Sharing Sacred Space amongst the Religions

Matthew W. Charlton

I. Introduction

This paper seeks to offer some ideas around the sharing of sacred space. The following series of questions frame the concern: should the religions share a worship space? Can they? Are there appropriate limits that honor the specific sacred nature of the religions that render this possible or impossible? Are multi-faith spaces like military chapels and university chapels sacred spaces or just spaces used for various forms of worship, whose sacredness enters and leaves with the worshipers? What is the status of the sacred space of a church consecrated for Christian worship when confronted with this kind of inter-religious question? For the sake of this paper, I would like to set to the side the idea that all space is sacred because of its created nature, focusing specifically on the practical issue at hand.

I would like to begin with a bit of contextualization. Shortly after making my proposal to the OI, I had a conversation with a member of a campus ministry board who was very explicit in his belief that there were no conditions under which he would participate in Muslim prayers at a mosque. Furthermore, he stated that if he found himself in a mosque during prayers, he would be compelled to share the “good news of the gospel.” Reflecting on this, I felt that sharing “the good news of the gospel” in that setting would be a stunning ironic failure and antagonistic to building good community relationships. I can understand why he would feel that way (his faith is in Jesus Christ and that faith takes a certain form) and by extrapolation, why adherents of religions other than my own would be reluctant to participate in ceremonies that take place in a Christian church (for instance, the history of the Christian colonization of people and ideas).

As a young person, I was warned by an evangelical youth pastor to stay away from Catholics because they worship the pope and Mary more than Jesus. As an adult about to participate in an indigenous sweat lodge ceremony in Mexico, I instructed by another person of the Christian Methodist sect (my very own people!) to prepare myself for an onslaught of demons and therefore to pray that I be protected with the armor of God, putting on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. Accordingly, I go to mass from time to time (especially when traveling – worship in Methodist churches can be so sketchy) and I found the sweat lodge to be a gratifying spiritual experience. When possible, I worship with and join in conversations with people of other faiths and, when called upon to give an invocation at a public event, make an effort to include all present while continuing to acknowledge the particularity of my own faith in the presentation. Rather than being weakened and made “less” Christian through these experiences, I find instead that my own faith and spiritual practice is deepened by the encounter with difference.

Despite these experiences and the convictions regarding interfaith experiences that I hold because of them, the reasoning I deploy as apologetic is accidental. I see no reason to cause offense to others; I trust in their good will; therefore, there is no reason to avoid or make a judgment against their practice of religion. As such, this brief paper is an effort to apply some theological reflection to an already ongoing practice.

II. The Common Bond – Shared Humanity

When representatives of faith communities gather in search of a common bond, what they find, or at least what I find, is that substantive theological agreements that can hold are not easy to come by. Without being dismissive, those theological agreements tend to run into forms of generic morality: peace, justice, compassion. These are values that we would want for ourselves, so we should also want them for others, regardless of faith. As such, these shared desires that emerge from our common desires for humanity become the starting point for interreligious dialogue. Each as creatures in a created world, there is significant agreement to be found in the humanity of the persons gathered for interfaith dialogue and, accordingly, of the humanity of the faith they represent. To begin with our shared humanity guarantees that *something* will emerge from encounters with other faiths. That alone is a meritorious result, if we hold that *something* is better than *nothing*, even if it is not as peaceful and life-giving as we would like.

I do not think we will, nor should we, end up with a version of a religion, or even no religion, that is universally communicable and universally understood. In part, this is a critique of how interreligious dialogue seeks to validate itself: find a common bond and then seek to eliminate tension by eliminating differences. To the contrary, the interreligious conversation that begins in the common bond of shared humanity receives its energy from the tension created by difference. Even if one form of a specific faith was universally held, it would be particularized by the human beings that populate distinct worshiping communities, rendering it all but unrecognizable to outsiders. In other words, religious practice in Buwasandeku village in Uganda (where I was two weeks ago) is not at all like Christianity in Nashville, Tennessee (where I live) and not like the religions practiced historically or presently around Joshua Tree National Park in California (where I was last week). Martha Nussbaum has some rather colorful ways of describing this reality in her book “The New Religious Intolerance” as she describes the presence of persons of different faiths that sit around her at White Sox baseball games, all cheering for the same team (common humanity) yet made different by their particularity (difference), which becomes an invitation to conversation toward increasing understanding of the other.[1]

The idea of shared sacred space is rooted in our shared humanity. Our destiny is shared, as climate change and the unending militarism of international differences are showing us starkly and as efforts toward peace and well-being emerge in places of oppression and poverty. From the common ground of our shared experience, we must

[1] Nussbaum, Martha. The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012).

seek ways of being together that are meaningful and include those moral agreements that encourage peace, justice, and compassion while honoring the difference that divides people of different faith. The most meaningful way of being together is learning to share the sacred space of world because of our religious and nonreligious particularity, not in spite of it. In other words, the shared space of the world is sacred because of difference.

III. Difference

The conversation around religious space is emerging and shifting at a rapid pace for academia. In addition to books like Nussbaum's, the most recent publication of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion contains an article by Robert Hayden and Timothy Walker that offers an analysis of historically shared religious space based around the ideas of "antagonistic tolerance" and "competitive sharing."[2] The authors conduct an analysis of religious locations that have changed faiths (like mosques into churches, and so on). Their analysis is both architectural (how are the architectural elements of one faith incorporated into the faith group that occupies the same space at a later date) and sociological (how are adherents of the former dominant faith incorporated or not into the faith of the newly dominant group). It points to a common practice regarding situations of the sharing of space for religious ritual: either the religions are separated by some architectural feature (a balcony, a wall, a side chapel) or the religions trade off the space through forms of dominance. The authors do not take account of religious space that is shared intentionally.

To that latter point, my plan for this paper was, in part, to make an argument for the common sharing of religious sacred space as a result of strategic interreligious conversation while in conversation with the way John Wesley deployed the buildings of the preaching houses for multiple uses, including preaching and instruction. It is clear from the historical record that Wesley would not have tolerated any amount of religious sharing in the preaching houses, even as the preaching houses were used for community related activities from time to time. He did not even tolerate non-Wesley approved Christian preaching and instruction, so much so that he sought to build new preaching houses as near as possible to houses that refused his oversight. One can guess that this was to undermine the fellowship of the other: difference was not to be tolerated at all, unless it was a difference that was outside of the Methodist connection. Rather than the tension of difference creating opportunity for conversation, for Wesley any difference was to be expelled from the society. Needless to say, I find that Wesley's drive to eliminate difference in the societies is a methodology that must be seriously reexamined if it remains a "proposal" for Methodist life today. Difference is inevitable and its inevitability should lead to its embrace. To force every member of a group into "the same" is to colonize the mind and deny the gift of individuality, which is the most aggressive form of spiritual violence.

[2] Hayden and Walker. "Intersecting Religioscapes: A Comparative Approach to Trajectories of Change, Scale, and Competitive Sharing of Religious Spaces." JAAR, vol. 81, no. 2, June 2013. pp 399-426.

Nevertheless, Wesley is not irredeemable on this topic. In his sermon "The Catholic Spirit" and in the "Letter to a Roman Catholic," he praises faithfulness, even if it is not the form of faithfulness that Wesley himself would choose. In the sermon, he is not speaking about interreligious issues but about an idea of Christian unity. He writes that people of God might seek a "union of affection" even as there may be a "difference in opinions or modes of worship" that prevent "an entire external union" (Catholic Spirit, Intro.4).[3] Wesley continues: "Every wise man therefore will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs" (Catholic Spirit, I.6). However, this does not mean that a person should not have a position on the opinions of others, specifically the doctrines of others. Wesley did not believe that a person could believe whatever they desired and still expect to be "of all those whose heart is right toward God and man (II.8). Accordingly, "The catholic spirit…is not an indifference to all opinions. This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven" (III.1). He continues to exclude forms of worship that are not plainly scriptural and rational (The 2nd II.2) and preclude "indifference to all congregations" (The 2nd II.3). Concluding the sermon, Wesley writes that the person who is not "indifferent" in the three ways listed above finds "his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is the catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives the title to this character – catholic love is a catholic spirit" (The 2nd II.4).

We must be clear that Wesley has in mind other Christians who, in his view, are faithful to the scripture, rational, and not of some pseudo-scriptural break away sect that has the form of religion only. Wesley craved uniformity and worked to manufacture it at every turn amongst the Methodists. Difference was objectionable because it would result in the breakdown of the emerging doctrinal "consensus," which Wesley declared to be his Sermons and Notes. The preaching houses of early Methodism, however, are a negative example of the power of difference, especially if difference is taken as something that is divisive rather than that which draws human beings together. Difference of various kinds, sometimes doctrinal and sometimes less "ultimate" concerns like power and money, drove some Methodists and Wesley apart. As noted, Wesley set out to solve these problem differences first by expelling, then by attempting to build new preaching houses in the place of non-doctrinally Methodist preaching houses. The long-term result was the Model Deed and, now, the Trust Clause, which prohibits un-Methodist activities in the several Methodist churches. The American Methodists, led by Wesley's bishops, successfully irritated old man Wesley with their difference, to the point that he declared they are no longer "one with us."

Nevertheless, one cannot help but see an openness in Wesley to spiritual ideas with which he is not altogether familiar and with which he may not agree. Perhaps the Wesleyan point of view would be that every person should practice their religion faithfully but that the particular Christian-Methodist way of practicing religion is to be

[3] I am referencing the Heitzenrater "blue book" of Wesley's Sermons. The number of sections and paragraphs for some reason is not consistent in this sermon, thus the rather strange references.

preferred and desired for all. However, there is no point in denying the evangelical impulse of Christianity in general and Methodism in particular. I am called to share the love of Jesus Christ with the world and to do so without shame. However, that call to share the love of Jesus may not be extracted from the love of Jesus itself, which is characterized by a radical openness to the other, gentleness to those wounded by all manner of physical, emotional, and spiritual violence, and humility in the face of difference. This spirit of love in the presence of difference (just so long as it isn't intra-Methodist difference or extra-Christian difference) is a strong Wesleyan principal. Nevertheless, this provides a historical and theological tool to explore and understand difference in a wider spiritual context.

III. Difference or Diversity

There are resources in the literature of postcolonial studies that will be helpful in illuminating the point of the sacredness of space derived from difference. Postcolonial studies critiques the colonial action that seeks to minimize difference from the dominating culture by enculturating the colonized to the dominate mode. Notably, these actions are taken principally for economic and political gain with a thin veneer of Christianizing the "heathens" of far-off lands. Fanon noted that the response to this from the colonized is to wear the mask of the colonizer, to become a pretender in order to retain one's original unique human dignity amidst the indignity of being colonized into change. The mask creates a barrier that prevents the authentic encounter with difference. Difference and tension are elided by pretension resulting in encounters that are not authentic. This is not the fault of the colonized but is rather a rational reaction against the threats to one's culture.

Homi Bhabha stretches Fanon's idea of the mask into "mimicry." In Bhabha, mimicry is an active form of disruption against colonial authority. It is an activation of the mask specifically intended to disrupt colonial "surveillance." From the colonial perspective, this allows for cultural diversity (diversity can be circumscribed) but does not tolerate cultural difference (or at least the kind of difference Bhabha has in mind). Simon Gikandi writes about this construct in Bhabha that "diversity is a containable category and an implicit value; difference signifies terms that slip from us every time we try to deploy them. One suspects that Bhabha's implicit assumption here – which also explains his preference for cultural difference – is that terms of diversity are always derived from the dominant category, while difference creates its own terms" (Gikandi, "In the Shadow of Hegel: Cultural theory in an age of displacement" Research in African Literatures. Summer 1996. Vol. 27, iss. 2, pp 139-158)

Difference is that which cannot be described by the other, but it is that which creates otherness on its own terms. Decisions regarding religious dress, for instance, are an example of difference not prescribed by toleration or diversity. Religious dress signifies difference. It does not signify a request to be tolerated or be included in the diversity of a community. Recently, I saw three Buddhist monks in a coffee shop. I experienced their difference by their outward symbols. Their robes and sashes set them apart. They did not ask my permission to dress this way and they did not ask me, as a member of

the Christian clergy, why I was dressed as a desert wanderer. I will point again to Martha Nussbaum's book for further study on the topic of religious dress as an expression of difference.[4]

We all do this is one way or another in order to find acceptance in certain circles. In Oxford and in front of the classes I teach, I wear the mask of the academic, one who thinks and studies about religious topics. Back in Nashville, I wear the mask of the pastor, one who presides over the sacred worship of the church and, from time to time, pretends to care about the color of tablecloths for a church luncheon. In mixed company, especially in the southern United States where conservative Christianity holds sway and there are certain expectations of pastors that I find objectionable, I become a writer or an educator or some other profession that will likely not set off a round of talk I want to avoid. These are not false masks, but they hide part of my identity in order to prevent conversations or events I do not wish to have or experience. I choose to hide or reveal my difference. Magnify that many fold for those persons whose lives and cultures have been colonized. Interreligious dialogue that respects difference (note: this is not a form of tolerance or permission) rooted in a mutual affection encourages the authentic unmasking of difference. For this reason, we must reevaluate notions of tolerance that requires power to permit the diversity of the other (note here that difference is not tolerated), with certain boundaries that may not be crossed without tolerance being revoked in favor of oppression. The epistemological hurdle to authentic interreligious dialogue is not without but within.

V. Multi-faith Communities

This paper opened with a series of questions, firstly, should the religions share a worship space? The answer rests in the shadow of difference. Space may be shared, but such sharing may not be required. Vanderbilt Divinity School offers an "All Faith Chapel" which is open to any group, religious or not, that wishes to use it. While a student at Vanderbilt, I refused to worship in this space not because of the good-natured "All Faith" idea of tolerance that brought it into being but because it was utterly devoid of ornamentation. No symbols of any faith can be found. To worship there did not "feel" like worship. Space matters and the architecture and ornamentation of space matters.

The question of sharing space must be answered with a willingness to "accept" difference. Honestly, I'm not sure how better to state that without it coming off as yet another form of tolerance. Living with difference does not have the same character as tolerating it or permitting it. Difference just is in itself, defining itself, as Bhabha noted. One of the more interesting examples of difference guiding decisions about space is the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska. The basics: a mosque, a church, and a synagogue have joined together and purchased a large plot of land that they share. Each congregation has its own distinctive worship space in close proximity to the other

[4] In light of recent events near Paris, the topic of religious dress is now again present in the news, with arguments for banning certain forms of dress and not others and arguments against any form of religious limitations to dress. Religious conduct is another matter.

worship spaces. All common space is shared by the congregations. No doubt, there are problems that arise from time to time related to community life. In the work of the Tri-Faith Initiative, difference is celebrated in particularity present in shared common space.

VI. Conclusions

Whereas I long overdue in submitting this paper, I will venture some further conclusions during our time together. In those conclusions, I will venture some further answers into the questions that frame this paper.